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ABSTRACT

Rural and urban education systems in China are compared in terms of funding, educational resources, living and learning environments, teacher quality, and students' chances of social mobility. Fundamental inequality exists between urban and rural schools. Differential treatment of two types of schools, "keypoint" and "ordinary," has resulted in unequal access and treatment for rural children. Keypoint schools are designated by the government and are given many privileges that other schools are not with respect to student and teacher selection and financial support. Graduates receive preferential treatment in higher education. This inequality does not result solely from geographical differences and imbalance in social and economic development, but is more the result of the fundamental structure of the Socialist institution, which supports the notion that the working class is the leading force in China, while the peasant class serves as subsidiary allies who merit inferior treatment. These inequalities cannot be corrected unless national educational goals change. There is a 17-item list of references. (SLD)

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ISSUES OF INEQUALITY IN CHINESE EDUCATION

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ISSUES OF INEQUALITY IN CHINESE EDUCATION

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China's education has been organized under the slogan that all children in the socialist system have equal access to educational opportunities and services. Is this true in China? This paper first compares China's rural and urban education in terms of funding, educational resources, living and learning environment, teacher quality, and students' chances of social mobility. It argues that fundamental inequality exist between urban and rural schools. Secondly, the paper examines the fact that differential treatment of two kinds of schools, namely the so-called "keypoint schools" and "ordinary schools" in rural and urban areas, have resulted in unequal access and treatment for rural children. The paper points out that ~~this~~ between rural and urban schools inequality results not just from geographical differences and imbalances in social and economic development, but more importantly from the fundamental structure of socialist institution which supports the notion that working class is the leading force in China while peasant class serves only as subsidiary allies who should be treated accordingly. The inequality existing between "keypoint schools" and "ordinary schools," which sort students and treat them differentially according to their potential of passing the National College and University Entrance Exam, is to be traced to the Chinese culture and to the existing employment system.

INEQUALITY BETWEEN RURAL AND URBAN SCHOOLS

The importance of rural education in China can be seen by the number of people involved. In 1989, students in rural primary schools numbered 110.39 millions, which was 89.3% of the total in the country. 37.32 million studied in general secondary schools, with 1.85 million attending technical and agricultural schools. There were 8.54 million teachers teaching at primary and secondary school level, who comprised 81.9% of all teachers in the nation. Despite these large numbers, rural education has been despised by many Chinese educators and ignored by the government in its educational planing and decision-making.

Fundamental inequality exists between rural and urban education in terms of the following areas. First of all, rural schools have consistently received much less funding from the state. As Robinson puts it:

> In China, the cost per urban child for education from kindergarten through lower secondary school averaged ¥6900 with an additional ¥6000-¥7000 for a regular higher education program. The expenditure for rural child presents a sharp contrast. The entire education, usually encompassing 5 years of primary schooling, but sometimes only three years, costs about ¥1600 (Robinson, 1991: 179).

Lack of funding has caused many problems for rural schools. School buildings are often very run-down, especially for primary schools which are usually located in villages. There have been reports about students being killed by falling buildings. Many rural schools do not have enough chairs and tables for students, a high percentage of classrooms do not have lights or enough lights. In winter, many classrooms do not have any kind of heating, which is true even in northern China, where the temperature can drop as low as minus 30 degree. In mountainous areas, rural students have to walk a long distance to go to schools, and girl students are often too scared to go at all. Very few transportation means are provided for these students.

Lack of funding has also led to shortage of schools, especially at the secondary level. Even though enrollment at primary schools has been high, for example, in 1985, the national net enrollment rate of school-age children is 95.9%, in 1986 96.4%, and in 1987, 97.1% (The National Center for Education Development Research, State Education Commission of China,

1989: 18), however, less than sixty percent of rural primary school graduates advanced to secondary education, much lower than that in urban areas (at the national level, only 67.47% of primary school graduates were admitted into junior high school in 1985, 68.76% in 1986, and 68.25% in 1987 (The National Center for Education Development Research, State Education Commission of China, 1989: 18)). The situation became worse in recent years when there is a substantial decrease of the already very low admission rate in junior high schools. In the 1980s many rural junior high schools were shut down, or several schools were combined into one, and the number of schools for rural students were much smaller. In Hubei province, the total number of rural schools was 10% less in 1986 than in 1980. In Shanxi province, there was a decrease of 2,889 schools for rural students, 7% less in 1986 than in 1982 (*People's Daily: Overseas Edition*, June 3, 1988, 4). Lack of schools has pushed more than half of the students out of school before they finish nine years' education.

Rural junior high school graduates have had very dismal possibility of being admitted to senior high schools. According to the Statistical Yearbook of China in 1986 (State Bureau of Statistics, 1986: 747), the number of senior high schools available in urban areas in 1985 was 5,485, in townships 5,926, and in rural areas, 5,934. These numbers indicate that for the huge student population in the rural areas (85% of the Chinese students are in the rural areas), the number of senior high schools available was almost the same as that in urban areas (a small number of rural students attend township high schools after passing very selective exams). This shortage in senior high schools means that a much higher percentage of students in rural areas have no senior high schools to go at all, which therefore greatly limits their opportunities for higher education and subsequently their social mobility.

Living condition in the rural areas are much poorer than urban areas, which put rural children in great disadvantage in competing with urban students in the national entrance exam. Rural families have much lower income than urban families. A table constructed from the Statistical Yearbook of China (State Bureau of Statistics, 1986 : 667-668, 673-674) shows the difference between rural and urban families in terms of the money they earned and spent on education:

Per Capita Income for Urban and Rural Family, and the Amount of Money Spent on Education by Each Family

(Unit: yuan)

Year	Annual Income		Amount Spent on Educ activities	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
1983	572.88	309.77	28.92	5.48
1984	660.12	355.33	34.92	6.53
1985	821.40	397.00	68.76	9.07

The table indicates that rural families have much lower income, and they spent much less on education compared with urban families. Higher income enabled urban families to provide better nutrition for their children, and to have more money to spend on books and intellectually stimulating extra-curricula activities and the like.

Rural parents' low income and thus limited amount of money that they can afford on their children's education has resulted in low levels of educational achievement. At national level, among those who were employed less than 1% had received higher education, 10.53% had received secondary education and 60.34% had received primary or junior high education. The illiteracy and semi-illiteracy rate was 28.26%. However, in rural areas, those who had received higher education were close to zero percent; only 5.18% have received secondary education, which was less than half of the national average; illiteracy and semi- illiteracy rate is as high as 36.55% (Liu Zheng, 1984: 37-46). It is difficult or impossible for many rural parents to give their children necessary coaching in school work. What is more, to lessen the burden of parents, from very early age, rural children

> "make themselves useful early by caring for their younger siblings, feeding livestock, weeding private plots, fetching water and gathering fuel. Although obviously these are simple tasks and thus within a child's capabilities, they are all essential to the household economy. If there is a child to perform them, an adult is freed for some more remunerative task. Often also a child would start to earn work-points by howling and

gleaning in the fields or taking livestock into the hills even before the official end of primary school" (Davin, 1985: 40).

This situation, true for rural children during the Mao era, has been especially serious under the economic reform since 1978. In many places, children under ten-year-olds are seen working in the fields doing long hours of heavy work. They are treated as small adults, having to contribute to making a living in the family. That children's foremost task is learning in school and that child labor is abusive are not widely held. In all, rural children have less financial resources, less parental help and less time to study, and they have to try harder in order to concentrate. As a consequence, a large number of them could not finish primary school, and secondary school is a privilege only for very few people.

Rural students are taught by teachers who generally received less education and less training in teaching, and whose living condition and teaching environment are much worse than urban teachers. China has more than two hundred teacher education colleges and universities, but most of the graduates are assigned to teach in cities rather than rural schools where teachers are most neede. Those who are assigned to a rural school will try every means to find a way back to city or to change their occupation. Teacher shortage has forced many rural schools to hire senior high school graduates and junior high school graduates, sometimes even people who just had several years of primary education. Most of them have very little training in teaching. They are the so-called "minban" teachers, who constituted about 80% of rural teachers. 1980s has seen efforts to retrain the unqualified teachers, but the number of teachers who received training are still small due to the huge number of teachers who need training, lack of funds for rural schools and lack of seats in teacher training schools.

Unlike urban teachers, rural teachers does not have the government's support on food, medicare, housing, and their income is only one-third of urban teachers' salary. In the 1980s, several government-mandated salary increasess for the purpose of improving teachers' living conditions barely affected rural teachers, who had minimum increase. Improvement in housing condition and teaching environment rarely applied to rural teachers. Instead, the new responsibility

system implemented under the economic reform, which features distributing collective-owned land to individual households for cultivation, saw the collective team accounting breaking up, teachers' source of food supply became rather insecure, with government support at the minimum level. To survive, many teachers have to cultivate a piece of land to grow their own crop, which is usually done after class or during term break, sometimes during the term. This inevitably distracts the attention of teachers, whose time to spend on their students and to update their knowledge are understandably less than before.

The present school system is set up to fail the majority of rural teachers. Under an educational system which puts excessive emphasis on the admission rate to colleges and universities, and which take this admission rate as the only criteria to evaluate teacher performance, rural teachers are in great disadvantage in comparision with urban teachers: they are teaching a group of students who have much less government support, whose living condition is poor, and whose parents have low level of education. Compared with their colleagues in cities, rural teachers have lower salary, poor living and working condition, fewer chances for preservice and inservice training. For these reasons, they are more subject to fail in competing to promote students to college education. According to a study, rural teachers have a very low sense of fulfilment (Ma Denhai et al, 1987).

As a combined effect of lack of funding, poor teaching quality, poor living and learning environment, rural students have had almost no social mobility in the Chinese society. Rural students have very dim chances of moving up the social ladder and improving their living conditions, given the strict residential policies implemented by the government since 1954. According to these policies, rural residents can not migrate to cities, where living and working conditions are much better. They must accept a hard life of toiling in the fields, with little support from the government on medical care, pension and guaranteed monthly salary, benefits only urban residents have the right to enjoy. For them, going to college is almost the only way to jump out of the "farming gate", and to become urban residents. But facotors discussed above determines that

rural children have very slim chance of passing the highly competivitive national college and university entrance exam and later be assigned a job in cities.

All these factors lead to a high number of dropouts in the rural areas. According to a survey, in a commune secondary school in Heilongjiang province, the dropout rate in 1975 was 21.6%; in 1976, 23.6%; in 1978, 31.8%, and in 1984, 71.5%. There are even more serious situations reported elsewhere. In a county junior high school in Shanxi province, of the 9,000 students enrolled, 2,500 dropped out in the first year, 2,500 dropped out in the second year. In the third year, only 1,000 passed the senior high entrance exams to continue school. Three years later, only 100 were admitted into colleges or universities (Lin Yulin, 1984: 36-40).

INEQUALITY BETWEEN KEYPOINT SCHOOLS AND COMMON SCHOOLS

Urban and rural schools in China are divided into two major kinds: "keypoint schools" and "ordinary schools" or "ordinary schools." Fundamental inequality exists between these two types of schools.

"Key-point" schools exist in all levels of China's educational system, enrolling about four percent of the secondary population and are largely concentrated in urban areas (Kathlin,1989: 8-9). At the national level, there are twenty keypoint schools under the direct supervision of the State Education Commission. At provincial and municipal level, as well as prefecture, county and commune level, education bureaux or offices are authorized to run key schools under their own jurisdiction. one to six key schools are recommended for each county or city district. Key schools at the beginning could be primary schools, junior secondary schools and senior high schools. Later with great pressure from parents and social forces, primary schools first, then junior secondary schools were not allowed to be divided into key and non-key. The common feature of all key schools are that they all boast high admission rate to colleges and universities.

Keypoint schools are often designated by the central government and the local government. They are treated as superior to common schools and are given many privileges. For example, they

are permitted to choose good students and teachers from other ordinary schools; they receive much more financial support from provincial government and local bureaus of education. Keypoint schools enjoy a much higher social status than ordinary schools. If a child is admitted into a keypoint school, the student is admired, the parents are envied, and the family is considered having a bright future. They are given preferential treatment in admission to higher education as well. The best students in keypoint schools do not have to take the national entrance exam, rather, they are directly picked by the most prestigious universities in China. Many keypoint schools are funded to invite foreign experts to teach, mostly English Language and other foreign languages. This allows "elite" students to show off better spoken English and more standard written English.

As has been mentioned, in China's evaluation system high admission rate to colleges and universities is the single criteria of excellence. The fact that keypoint schools have the privilege of selecting the best students and teachers from schools around have given them advantages over common schools. Some keypoint schools enjoyed an impressive 95% admission rate in the graduating class.

The prestige enjoyed by keypoint schools and favorable treatment from bureau of education have been resented by teachers and students in ordinary schools, which enrol about ninety-five percent of all students. The author was once told by a teacher that in her school, when a basketball contest was held between a keypoint school and an ordinary school, the student crowd would cheer whenever the keypoint school lost a scoring chance. This kind of tension also exist among teachers. For example, a teacher reported that if a teacher from a keypoint school came to introduce her/her teaching experiences to teachers in ordinary schools, as this kind of activity is often organized by the city bureau of education, he/she would be scorned. Teachers in ordinary schools would say: "if we were in his shoes we can do a much better job." In her city, it is general practice that teachers from all schools gathered at the end of a term to correct exams taken by all students in the city. Teachers from ordinary schools often have very sharp eyes in detecting which exam paper belong to students in keypoint school, even though the name of the students and of the schools are tightly covered. To these exam papers they would make a big mark down on a tiniest mistake.

"They make us so nervous that we force the students to write English in the most tidy way, for example, never let these teachers pick our students' handwriting of 'e' for 't'," the teacher told me.

Teachers teaching in ordinary schools have been under great distress. Having to teach students left over by the keypoint schools greatly discourage them, which affect their motivation and confidence. Seeing themselves as baby-sitters, they are reported to be more than eager to send the students away. Their work is often given little respect, and they have to work much harder in order to gain very little. Low learning moral prevails among students as well. Many choose to wander away their time, giving themselves up for academic achievement. School administrators, as a last resort to boost up teachers' moral and the school's fame, often gather students whose scores are just below the keypoint schools' admission line and assign the best teachers in the school to teach them. With this effort, a few of them are able to pass the national entrance exam. Parents who do not want to give up have to spend their hard-earned money and send their children to learn from retired teachers or to take additional classes which are given by colleges and universities after school and during holidays.

Compared to ordinary schools, situation in keypoint schools is totally different. Teachers in keypoint schools are reported to generally have a much higher self-esteem. Their sense of fulfillment are much greater than teachers in common schools. They hold high expectation on students. An English teacher told the author that she stressed to her students that, to her, ninety-five points out of one hundred point scale means only "pass." She was happy that after working hard, the students did fulfil her expectation.

Students generally have a much higher motivation to learn. Being a student in an elite school is enough to promote a positive learning attitude. Students can virtually sense an "institutional expectation" on them to do well. Although the keypoint schools use the same kind of textbooks with ordinary schools, the expectation on the students is totally different. Under such atmosphere, students work extremely hard. Everyday they are given heavy homework, and seldom they have time to watch TV in the evening. On Saturday evenings, whether or not they can watch TV depends on whether they have finished the week's homework. In Chinese schools, there is

usually a nap time after lunch, but students seldom take a rest, instead they use the time to work on their homework. During weekends they usually attend additional classes offered by the school with extra payment. Excessive use of eyes render a large number of students short-sighted. Some schools organize students to practice traditional Chinese curing methods, give seminars on protecting one's eyes, etc. but the number of short-sighted students keeps on growing.

The tracking system has been widely criticized for its negative impact on students, so that the government decided that junior high schools should not be divided into keypoint schools and ordinary schools. This means that keypoint schools would not be given the priority to select their students for junior high schools. In order to retain its supreme position among schools in the area, many keypoint schools close off their junior sections and concentrate on only senior high school sections, all with the purpose to achieve high admission rate.

WHY THE INEQULITIES?

Analysis of Rural Urban Inequality

What bring about the inequality between rural and urban schools? This can be traced to the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is the founding principle of the Chinese communist system. When the People's Republic was founded in 1949, it was made a principle that urban working class is the leading force in socialist reconstruction and that peasant class is the alliance of workers. Peasants, whom the CCP had relied on to defeat the Nationalist Party, were not to be treated as a leading force in the socialist stage, such as the urban working class was. Rather, they were defined to be under the leadership of the CCP and the working class. The rational was that they were a group of lesser quality, limited by many weaknesses such as conservatism, superstition, shortsighted vision, stubborness, and so on. These shortcomings came with the fact that Chinese peasants being bound to land for thousands of years, using simple means of production and having received limited in education. On the contrary, urban workers were praised to be connected with

advanced technology and industry, have the discipline and the vision necessary to lead a communist cause, who, though, have to be guided by their vanguard, the Chinese Communist Party. It is therefore justified that the socialist system should be one for the dictatorship of the proletariat, and that the peasants are people of secondary importance and should accordingly be given less economic and political power. In all, the dictatorship of the proletariat legitimizes favorable treatment for urban residents, while peasants have to be submissive to poor living condition, low social status and limited social mobility and many other disadvantages in life.

Specifically in the economic sphere, rural peasants have received very little support from the state. They do not have a guaranteed ration of food and monthly salary to be counted on from the government. They have to rely on themselves in terms of medicare, retirement, lodging, and education to a larger extent. As Potter and Potter point out:

> Peasants have a particular relationship to the state, a relationship in which the rice they eat is not provided for them under the terms of their employment. And this specifically peasant type of relationship to the state is maintained in practice by specifically *peasant forms of bureaucracy and social organization* [1] which are not used by workers, who have differing specific forms of their own. These peasant forms of social organization reflect the assumption that the relationship between peasants and the means of production is different from the relationship between workers and the means of production; the difference may be seen in the way peasants are paid, and in the economic risks they are required to assume (Potter and Potter, 1990: 298).

These structural distinction has institutionalized the inequality between urban residents and rural peasants. With little government support, peasants have to bear any loss caused by bad weather or other natural and human disasters. Each year, they had to hand in substantial amount of grain to the state, which were collected with extremely low price and which were distributed to urban residents. Often, rural peasants had to work for a whole year and still had not enough to eat,

[1] This emphasis is added by me.

given that little was left for them after delivering the government-mandated grain. In education, they had to squeeze every penny for their children to go to school, often having to relying on raising pig and chicken for sale. A tuition of one to three yun a year was impossible for many families who were constantly on debt, having to work for years to pay them off.

The institutionalized discrimination is inherited by children of the peasants, who had to be peasants all their life by birth. There were very limited chances for them to become urban residents, and their obligation to serve the state (deliver grain on behalf of the nation) started once they were born to the family of a rural peasant.

This system was made possible by a detail set of residential regulations made by the government. A detailed set of regulations was in place which restrict Chinese peasants' the rights of migration to urban cities:

> Briefly put, the household registration system acted as a means of identifying every citizen, registering all changes in status, controlling all changes of residence, whether temporary or permanent, and providing the basis for the distribution of rationed food and goods. Without valid registration document, rations were unobtainable, nor could an unregistered person find regular employment. Changes from urban to rural residence required elaborate documentation (Potter and Potter, 1990: 301).

Peasants were thus forced to be bound to the land, in a way prevented to rise above the weaknesses they were condemmed to have by being bound to land. However, despite strict government policies peasants did try to migrate to cities, especially during very bad time, such as when there was a famine. But most of the time, they were forced to come back to the rural areas by strict measures issued by the government. The arguments were that it would cause dangerous social results such as city transportation, housing, market supply, employment and educational opportunities in urban cities (Luo Ruiring, 1959: 212). Little attention was given to why the peasants were there, and what kind of sufferings they had gone through.

There were only four ways for peasants to become urban residents. They have to become political bureaucrats who may be promoted to work in cities. They have to serve in the armed

forces and be promoted to certain ranks, which, according to government policies, allowed them to retire to urban areas. Or they are married to urban workers, which is only likely for girls. Rural men had almost no chance of marrying an urban girl, even though they might be handsome and intelligent and rich. Rural girls often had to be very beautiful to marry an urban man, who normally have had difficulty to find an urban woman because of physical handicap, personal defects, poverty and so on. For the greater majority of people who have no power, no money, who possess only ordinary looks, passing the national college and university entrance exam is the only path to a life in city. The possibility of doing these four things are very low, due to the large gap between rural and urban lives. The differential treatment

> has been made the basis for classification into two caste-like civil status groups, a higher status group called "urban personnel," and a lower status group called rural personnel." Membership in either group is inherited from the mother, assigned at birth, and can not be changed except under the most extraordinary circumstances. The result is a system of birth-ascribed stratification which, considered as a whole, displays a caste-like features (Potter and Potter, 1990: 296).

Restricted by government policies, peasants had much less access to a wide range of benefits than urban workers. They were far away from movies, music, opera; from good schools, parks, museums; from large department stores, important government organizations, higher education institutions. Low economic status is accompanied with low social status. Many experiences have been very humiliating. Local peasants were often ridiculed by their accents, their looks and their clothes and tastes. When they go to cities, they are often publicly insulted. A university student from rural areas could be despised by his classmates even if he proves he excels in many things.

> "This system is an extraordinary one, and full of paradoxes. It is a deliberately created system of birth-ascribed status, in the context of modern socialist state, enforced by bureaucratic methods rather than by custom" (Potter and Potter, 1990: 312).

John Ogbu (1986) argues that American blacks were put in caste-like position, having a limit on the kind of occupation they can have. Limited social mobility affects their inspiration and self-esteem, giving them different ideas about the importance of education. Reflecting on China, Chinese peasants have been in similar kind of situation. The differences are that their caste-like status is institutionalized, justified under the system for the dictatorship of the proletariat. Therefore for a long time in China, questioning the legitimacy of differential treatment of workers and peasants was equated with challenging the founding principle of socialism, things that inevitably would cause severe punishment, or even loss of life. Samule Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that American education is reproducing the class relationship in the capitalist economic system. Reflecting on China, one can argue that the educational system under CCP's control rather reproduced the political relationship in the society, with the peasants being systematically disadvantaged (Lin, 1991).

Moderate changes have taken place since 1978, when an agricultural reform was launched and a responsibility system was introduced in the rural areas. A major measure was that the state-owned land was contracted to individual peasants for cultivation, replacing the collective cultivation system which lasted 25 years or so. Peasants are given more flexibility as to what they want to produce, how to produce and what to do with their products after handing in the contracted amount to the state. The new system highly motivates the peasants in that it allows them to earn more if they produce more, which was not true in the formerly egalitarian system.

The reform also encourages diversified forms of production. Family industry, specialized household, rural industrial enterprises flourish by the hundred of thousands in the past decade. More opportunities are available for the peasants now to to leave the land and to work in a wide range of jobs. Many went to cities to become contracted workers, babysitters, to open up grocery stores, or to transport goods from one area to another. A small number of peasant become rich by Chinese standards, and the overall living condition improves. Despite this, Chinese peasants are still at the bottom of the society, having little political power in their hands.

In summary, the great contrast between rural and urban education stems from the inequality in China's economic, political and social system. Rural children will continually be disadvantaged if conscious efforts are not made from the government to the local level to improve rural schools in terms of funding, teacher quality and the like. The economic reform has opened up some possibilities for rural peasants to have certain social mobility, but the reform has suffered many setbacks due to the turbulent political climate in China. Under the present government's insistence that China will hang on to the dictatorship of the proletariat as a guiding principle, rural children will continue to have limited educational opportunities, even though they make up the majority of the Chinese population.

Analysis of Inequality Between Keypoint Schools and Common Schools

The inequality existing between "keypoint schools" and "common schools" can be traced to the Chinese culture, which sees passing the national entrance exam and getting admitted by colleges and university as noble and glorious. It can also be traced to the current employment system, in which graduates with higher education are given a secured job, stable salary, high social status and opportunities of moving up the social echelon.

The present tracking system in China grows out of the Chinese tradition. China has fourteen hundred years' history of examination. From the Shui Dynasty (about 400 AD) to 1905, China had had employed an examination system which was used to select bureaucrats from among intellectuals to serve in the government. Those selected had been given titles and power, which brought them not only prestige and status, but also lands, beautiful wives and prosperity which could last for generations. To excel in the exam, people spent years reading, writing and memorizing articles. High reward begets high expectation and motivation, while failures could mean disaster. The author had an ancestor who was the last one in his county to pass the exam for *xiuchai*. But by mistake, this title was given to someone with a similar name. This ancestor could not stand the fatal loss and died of broken heart one year later. The exam system has greatly

contributed to the notion that people who engage in physical labor are to be looked down upon and those who do works requiring mental efforts are to be greatly respected. That the purpose of education is for taking the national entrance exam is a belief widely accepted in the Chinese society.

Education system in the socialist stage has maintained the cultural tradition of selecting students to become government bureaucrats. In 1954, the tracking system was designed to differentiate the treatment of students according to their potentials of passing the entrance exam. The system has since experienced ups and downs. From 1954 to 1966, students were separated into college-bound track or ordinary track. But this was abolished from 1966 to 1976 during the Cultural Revolution under the criticism that the system discriminated against children of the working class. It was replaced by a system providing general, liberal arts education to all students regardless of their background. During this era, colleges and universities admitted students not by exam but by the recommendation of workers and peasants from one's work unit. When the Cultural Revolution was ended, the system was restored in 1977, and once again the function of primary and secondary schools became that of providing qualified students to higher education institutions. The author still vividly remember the excitement people felt, the nervousness in waiting for exam results, and the great joy and pride the fortunate ones experienced. How to prepare for the exams, where there are good teachers, whose children are really clever, became the topics of every community. After ten years of struggles, people finally felt that there was a hope if one could pass the exam and became college and university students.

The tracking system was restored with the support of the government. The rationale for running key point schools is to concentrate limited human, financial and material resources in a group of school so as 1) to improve the quality of secondary education, 2) to sum up and accumulate the experience of effective school management, and 3) to set up examples for ordinary schools to follow (Qian Jingfang and Huang Kexiao, 1987: 95). Having analyzed the differential treatment of students in keypoint and non-keypoint schools, we argue this system has done more harm than good, that it negate the interest of the majority of students for the success of a few, and that it is highly unequal, contradictory to the government's claim of "raising the overall level of

education in the country." Using Billie Lo's words, "a likely trend is for this two-track system to become, in effect, a major mechanism for stratification in China" (Lo, 1984: 62). The system has in effect enlarged the gap between schools. As a newspaper article said: "the keypoints are too key, the ordinary schools are too weak. The ordinary schools can not learn from the experience of the keypoints so that keypoints are isolated... .Under these conditions, even if these schools have a high promotion rate, it has lost its significance" (quoted from Stanley Rose, 1984: 84).

Chinese parents are willing to use up their life-long saving to support their children. Many parents save the money by eating little meat which is expensive and by wearing simple clothes for years. They generally hold very high expectation on their children, "to wish one's child to become a dragon" has been the norm. When their children were still very young they would spend hours in the evenings and during the weekends to coach their children, giving up TV programs and holidays. Many parents would borrow from libraries or buy from bookstores textbooks for various grade levels and would study them far into the night in order to be able to better coach their children. Economic concern and other concerns are an important factor behind these efforts. If their children are admitted into a university, they will be relieved that finally their children will have a stable future. At the very least, they know that their children will not become "contracted workers" to factories or hotels who may be fired as the contracts expire and who have not health insurance and other benefits. They don't have to fear that their children would end up in the street gang after they fail to locate a job, as many do. They will have social mobility, for sure to be designated as "the country's cadres" who enjoy permanent job, possibility to change profession or even to go broad to study. Therefore, it is common that when a student is admitted to a keypoint school school, many parents would hold a banquet to celebrate the event. After all, they have already seen the light of dawn.

Although keypoint schools claim to adhere to meritocracy, not all students are admitted by merit. For example, money can buy access to keypoint schools. In the process of changing from state-planned economy to what the government denotes as partial market economy, some big factories and enterprises are able to make great fortune and to retain part of that, after paying taxes

to the government, to spent on the benefits of their employees. To exchange for seats and thus better opportunities to learn for the children of their employees, they offer to spend large sums of "education fee" to buy the access to keypoint schools, who also need the money to give teachers and administrators as bonus, to build better buildings and to buy more equipment. Thus after bargain back and forth, they sign the contract and accept the students who have much lower scores. In a southern city, some big businesses and enterprises gave the only keypoint school in the city ¥3,000 (which is equal to two persons' annual salary) for each student admitted. The school admitted one hundred students whose scores were below the admission line and became instantly three hundred thousand yuan richer. Teachers in the school worried that these students might drag down the overall score of the school and suggested to set up separate classes for these students. This idea opposed by the businesses and enterprises who claimed "we spend money for our children to 'equal education,'" students were distributed among classes whose students were admitted as a result of high scores. As a consequence, the average scores in the graduation classes in some schools were much lower. This shows that money is used as a commodity to exchange for educational opportunities, and meritocracy has given way to power and money.

Political power often prevails over meritocracy. The fact that a large number of keypoint school students come from a family background of government official tells that political power counts tremendously in China. Several factors are involved here. First of all, when educational bureaux or offices were to decide which schools to be changed into "keypoint" schools, they usually chose schools in districts where government officials live. As an unwritten rule, children who live nearby are admitted into a keypoint school without having to take the highly competitive entrance exam. The exam is usually given for students from other districts or from the whole city. Secondly, many government bureaucrats have "back doors," that is, they can use the power in their hands to press schools to admit their children, and they could promise the school favorable consideration in future decision-makings. Thirdly, many schools, in order to please their superior or to obtain favorable treatment in funding, admit these children by lowering admission standards. The author was once admitted to a county keypoint school by passing several tough exams. The

class was originally planned to admit just twenty students, but when school began, there were more than forty-five students. All of the additional twenty-five students were "back door" students. Finally, political power in China is often extended into economic and educational power. Government bureaucrats enjoy high salary, access to information, good living condition, many privileges such as to travel in first class cabin free of charge, tickets to concerts and movies, and so on. All these help their children to achieve in school. The author has asked teachers teaching in keypoint schools whether there are children from working class families and peasant families, the answer is "yes, but only a few of them. They have to be very good in order to be admitted."

Jeanie Oakes notes in her book Keeping Track (1985) that children in lower tracks tend to have lower self-esteem, and lower motivation to learn. Teachers tend to expect less from them and treat them differentially. Learning environment is not as good as the that in the high track. Teachers and students in ordinary schools in China went through the same kind of experience. They felt discouraged not only within the boundary of school, they were also looked down upon in the neighborhood, seen as incapable and incompetitive by the larger society. The tracking system, instead of teaching students according to their abilities and interests, as many schools claim these to be the purpose, serve to be a sorting machine, with the "good seed" retained, taken great care of, and the "poor seed" ignored, discarded, and despised.

There have been much criticism of the tracking system in China, but few of them touched on the issue of inequality. In the highly centralized educational system, educators have very limited say in terms of educational policy-making. Despite strong complaints from parents and teachers, there has been little initiatives to improve the situation over the last decade. The goal of schooling is still sending the best students to colleges and universities.

In summary, the two track system creates inequalities in terms of students' access to educational opportunities, in terms of their treatment in school and subsequently, in terms of their life chances. By permiting the tracking system, the majority of Chinese students are denied the access to quality education, they are treated differentially, suffering academically and psychologically. Students in common schools are given little hope of social mobility, and their life

chances will be very different from that of keypoint school students. This system perpetuate, on the basis of Chinese culture, the elite system in Chinese society, with government bureaucrats using the power in their position to extend their personal interest and with intellectual to provide good education for their children. Unfortunately, the government continually argues that this system is necessary and justifiable, and most educational researchers fall short of pin-pointing the inequality in the system. With Chinese educators lacking the decision-making power to change the situation, the inequality will persist for a long time to come.

Conclusion

China's education system, for political, economic and cultural reasons, have failed to provide equal access and equal treatment to a majority of students, which in return have great impact on their life chances. The inequality is deeply rooted in the culture, supported by the social institutions, and reinforced over many years. The economic reform starting from 1978 has alleviated the problem of rural and urban inequality in terms of living standard, but the majority of rural students are still prevented from having social mobility because of the inferior education they received. Inequality between keypoint and ordinary schools give opportunities to only a small number of students, which will not be corrected unless there is a shift of the goal of education in the national education system.

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